



Department of Justice

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The recent emergence of synthetic designer drugs, commonly referred to as “bath salts,” in our community is creating a serious public health concern. Ingestion of these substances can cause physical reactions such as nausea, heart failure, and stroke, as well as psychotic reactions like paranoia, delusions, suicidal ideation, and violent outbursts. The growing abuse of these synthetic compounds is being reported by the healthcare community and local law enforcement at an alarming rate. The American Association of Poison Control Centers reported 5,853 calls to their centers related to bath salt exposure in 2011, a dramatic increase from 303 such calls in 2010.

“Bath salts” are mixtures of many different chemicals, including those that resemble cocaine, methamphetamine, and MDMA or “ecstasy.” These drugs are in commercial establishments on and the street under the general category of “research chemicals,” “bath salts” or “plant food” with a disingenuous claim that they are not for human consumption. They are labeled with names like “Ivory Wave,” “Purple Wave,” “Vanilla Sky,” and “Bliss.” Marketing in this manner attempts to hide the true reason for the products’ existence -- the human consumption of these psychoactive stimulants.

Many people mistakenly think the sale of these synthetic substances is legal. The law makes the distribution of “analogue” substances marketed for human consumption illegal if they are chemically and pharmacologically similar to a scheduled illegal drug. The DEA and our office will use the available provisions of the statute to investigate and prosecute those who sell these synthetic substances. Proposed federal legislation and changes in state law are expected to assist federal and state prosecutors in this effort.

Law enforcement is working hard to stem the flow of these “bath salts” into our communities. Our office has joined efforts with the Drug Enforcement Administration and our state and local law enforcement partners to locate, test and identify these substances and then prosecute those who illegally distribute them. As proof of this office’s commitment, four individuals from the Charlottesville and Augusta County areas were recently convicted in federal court of conspiring to distribute “bath salts.” Other investigations are currently ongoing. Those involved in distributing these synthetic drugs should understand that significant resources are being devoted to the investigation and prosecution of these cases where the law permits.

While it is important for law enforcement to vigorously enforce the laws, it is equally important that the community become educated as to the harmful effects of these drugs and that we speak with our children, neighbors and friends regarding the significant health risk they pose.

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